

TEXT OF A LETTER SENT OCTOBER 26, 1964 TO M. RENE MAHEU, DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO, BY MYKOLA LEBED, SECRETARY GENERAL FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE SUPREME UKRAINIAN LIBERATION COUNCIL.

Your Excellency:

With full appreciation of the work being done by UNESCO in the cultural and scholarly fields, and in particular of the world-wide popularization this year of Taras Shevchenko on the 150th anniversary of his birth, permit me to bring to your attention some very disturbing aspects of the recent fire which occurred in the National Library of the Academy of Sciences, Ukrainian S.S.R. in Kiev.

The blaze broke out in the early hours of May 24, 1964 and quickly spread to all four floors of the building. The Soviet press has so far virtually ignored this fire and the destruction of archival materials and books by burning and water damage. Only four days after the blaze broke out, on May 28, was there a small item on the last page of Radyans'ka Kul'tura (a Ukrainian language newspaper published in Kiev), which stated:

A fire broke out on May 24, 1964 in the National Library of the Academy of Sciences UkSSR. Thanks to the tireless action of the Kiev Fire Department the fire was localized and put out. According to the authorities of the Academy of Sciences UkSSR the entire manuscript department and card index are intact, and the basic book departments have suffered little damage and can be restored from duplicate reserves. An official commission has been appointed to investigate the cause of the fire and to take measures to rebuild the Library.

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On May 29, 1964 Vechernaya Moskva (a Moscow daily), in its dispatch from Kiev wrote that approximately 10 per cent of the Library's possessions were destroyed by the fire. Among these were the documents and other archival materials pertaining to the period 1918-1930. The same correspondence from Kiev mentioned "a mentally disturbed female employee of the Library" as the arsonist.

Literaturnaya Gazeta, another Moscow paper, printed July 4, 1964 a report from its Kiev correspondent, which said that according to the chief of the Foreign Department of the library, K. D. Bakulin, the fire had done no damage to his department and that the exchange of publications with foreign countries would continue as usual.

This is about all that has appeared in the Soviet press about the fire thus far. Almost six months have gone by, and still the individual who, according to the official announcement was to have set the fire, has remained unnamed. There has neither been any indication whether this person was actually insane, nor the result of the investigation of the fire.

On the basis of statements by tourists, who had witnessed the fire, as well as from information received here from the inhabitants of Kiev, I would like to call to

your attention to the following facts:

1. The fire destroyed the most important historical archives of the 1918-1930 period including some of the archival material brought to Kiev from Lviv during the Second World War. Besides the archives, the fire destroyed a significant number of rare books by classical Ukrainian writers. Among the Library's possessions lost in the fire were, according to our information, the entire archive of Mykhaylo Hrushevsky, the greatest Ukrainian historian, and of Serhiy Yefremov, the man of letters who died in prison during Stalin's regime, as well as that of Panteleymon Kulish, the 19th century Ukrainian writer whose works are still banned by the Soviet authorities. Among the books destroyed were those by the pre-Revolution Ukrainian writers, including the works of the classic Ukrainian writer Borys Hrinchenko, as well as books written in the 1920s and 1930s.

2. Our sources also indicate that flames shooting out of the Library's windows were yellow in color, that boxes containing flammable material were found in various places throughout the building, and that fire hydrants in the area ran dry, which prolonged the fighting of the fire.

3. In their letters the residents of Kiev insist that the woman-arsonist mentioned by Vechernaya Moskva was merely used to shield those who were really responsible for the fire. They express great indignation over "this great tragedy of the Ukrainian culture."

Having gathered the above-mentioned facts, the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council concludes that the fire was deliberate and a carefully planned act of arson, done with the approval or knowledge of someone in authority. The following reasons led to this conclusion:

- a. the meagre coverage by the Soviet press of this partial destruction of Ukraine's greatest library;
- b. the complete silence about the fire maintained by the official circles both in Kiev and in Moscow. This is unusual even by Soviet standards, since, according to one of the three press reports, at least 10 per cent, or some 600,000 invaluable books were destroyed;
- c. the known fact that flammable chemicals are not available to ordinary Soviet citizens, only to those who are in an official capacity;
- d. the destroyed possessions included the invaluable materials pertaining to the history of the Ukrainian nation, its struggle for independence, statehood and freedom. This fire, therefore fits into the plan of the official policy of the Central Committee of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, which has as its aim the merging of the Ukrainian and other peoples of the U. S. S. R. through Russification.

We, of the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council, consider this carefully staged arson in the Academy of Sciences Library as a barbarous act, worthy of the methods used by Hitler.

On behalf of the Supreme Ukrainian Liberation Council I am asking you, in your capacity as the head of the highest world organization for culture and scholarship to demand from the Governments of the U. S. S. R. and the Ukrainian S. S. R. an explanation of the causes of the fire and an exact statement of the losses.

Moreover, I respectfully request that you offer the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian S. S. R. any aid in replacing at least some of the losses by original materials and microfilms from the library possessions of the West.

I sincerely hope that you will make this recent threat to world culture and scholarship, which occurred in Kiev, known to the world.

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